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Common Core - Uncommon School: Teaching and Learning in the Walton Rural Life Charter School in Walton, KS

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Abstract

Editorial

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Common Core – Uncommon School: Teaching and Learning in the Walton Rural Life Charter School in Walton, KS

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Editorial

“Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.”

John Dewey

John Dewey’s quintessential quote perhaps sets the stage for the premise of this article better than any other source. His “learn by doing” approach to education has been in and out of vogue since the 1930s. Yet now, with the advent of a more common sense, common core standards approach to teaching and learning, the pendulum may be swinging back, as evidenced by what has occurred since a small, rural, low-enrollment elementary school in Kansas shifted both its philosophy and focus as part of its move to a nationally recognized charter school.

Walton’s roots can be traced back to its origin as a K-12 rural school which began its work in 1934 and served as a hub of activity for the small, rural Kansas town of the same name. Over time, the town became smaller, the school struggled to retain enrollment, and it eventually became part of the Newton Unified School District USD 373 as an elementary school. However, enrollment issues persisted, leading to increasing concerns regarding its future. Ironically, during this same time, school districts were being urged to write for charter school funding to promote innovative and out-of-the-box schools throughout the state.

As a superintendent, the prospect of transforming Walton into a charter school, with dollars available to support change, was an appealing one to me. As I considered various themes for the school, an obvious one came to mind; Walton was in the middle of a rural, predominantly agricultural area of Harvey County, Kansas. It seemed logical to create a “rural life center” around that theme. So, in 2007, with the assistance of the district’s very capable grant writer at the time, Barbara Burns, and with the unanimous approval of the USD 373 Board of Education, a charter application was submitted to the Kansas State Department of Education. The application also had the unqualified support of the school’s principal, Natise Vogt, and all of the staff working in the school.

We had begun to plan anticipating a three year implementation timeline. Imagine our surprise when, because of changes in the charter implementation policies at the federal and state levels, we had to telescope the first two years into one, combining staff training with implementation and building an addition to the school at the same time. It was, needless to say, a whirlwind of activity! And, yet, it was an energizing adventure for all of us in the school district.

Walton not only survived the accelerated timetable, it began to thrive. Teachers focused on the agricultural theme, and instituted project-based learning as a primary method of teaching and learning in the building. We were able to utilize the newly constructed greenhouse, powered by a wind turbine secured by a grant, as a teaching and

learning laboratory. I will never forget visiting a classroom in the building where students and teachers had just discovered aphids in the greenhouse. The teachers, Kathy Murphy and Derrick Richling, used a document camera to show the insects to the students, they researched methods of dealing with them by utilizing the Internet, and formulated a plan to save the plants in the greenhouse. If anything epitomized “learning by doing,” this example certainly did.

In addition, farm families adopted each classroom, allowing students to follow the agricultural cycle through visits to individual farms throughout the year. They began to produce items that could be sold via a local farmers’ market. They made their own salsa. They attended agriculture camp in the summer to extend their learning. And, more importantly, we saw gains in learning from students that were unprecedented, especially from students with special learning needs.

With additional funding, we were able to construct a teaching barn so that farm animals could both be housed on site and brought in for student learning activities. An informal school mascot, Petey, the goat, led the students and staff in their daily walking activity around the school property.

Chickens, and the eggs they produced, were also added to the overall learning environment. An initial experience with chickens also afforded students and staff an additional learning opportunity. Once the coop was built and the fencing was put in place, the chickens were installed in their new home prior to the weekend. When the students returned to school on Monday, not a chicken was to be found. Enterprising foxes had dug under the fencing and had decimated the flock. Not to be deterred, teachers, staff and parents used the event as a teaching moment to stress the need for a barrier to be constructed beneath the fence which would keep animals from availing themselves of the opportunity to select chickens for their next meal. Teachers now use the eggs collected by students as part of a science learning activity and the sale of eggs as an exercise in math application while also serving as a mini-fund raiser for the school.

As with any school, Walton remains a work in progress. The principal, through the school’s charter status, has allowed her very creative teachers to exercise creativity and flexibility in their approach to teaching and learning, still keeping the end in mind – the standards students are expected to master at each grade level. Kansas State Department of Education data for the 2011-2012 school year provides the following statistics for the school: 92.6% of the students perform at or above the standard in reading; 100% of the students perform at or above the standard in science, and 100% of the students perform at or above the standard in mathematics. (KSDE Online Report Card at www.ksde.org). In addition, the school has received multiple recognitions for both its overall program and academic achievement, including receiving the Governor’s Award and being named a finalist in the Intel Corporation Schools of Distinction in 2011. (Intel)

All of these successes have been occurring at Walton over the past five years first in the context of a national effort orchestrated by the federal government through No Child Left Behind and now in the transitioning to the common core standards initiative which has been adopted by the majority of the states, including Kansas. Walton, however, has been ahead of the curve as usual. The school could serve as a prime example of what the common core is working to instill in all schools in the country.

“The Common Core State Standards focus on core conceptual understandings and procedures starting in the early grades, thus enabling teachers to take the time needed to teach core concepts and procedures well – and to give students the opportunity to master them.” (Common Core Standards Initiative) The expectation is that the Common Core will provide a “real-world approach to learning and teaching.” (Core Standards State of Washington) Such an approach focuses on application of knowledge, consistent learning expectations, clear standards focused on understanding and critical thinking and a more meaningful assessment process (CCSS State of Washington). And, as John Young states in his commentary regarding the standards in *The Denver Post*, “Education isn’t just about plugging individuals into the workforce. It’s about exciting them about the possibilities of the mind.”

I would contend that Walton teachers and their students not only extend the “possibilities of the mind,” but could serve as a demonstration school for successful implementation of the common core standards. With the school’s focus on problem solving and critical thinking through a project based infrastructure, Walton students are among some of the best prepared students in the district to succeed in mastering the common core standards which will prepare them for continued success in “college, work and life.” (CCSS State of Washington) For example, the second graders have their chicken project. In English/Language Arts (ELA), they are to read three stories and compare/contrast. They use stories about chickens (ex- “The Little Red Hen”). They can compare and contrast with those stories. They sell the eggs and use math money skills in making change and counting their money.

For students to be successful as they confront the challenges of the 21st century, a different skill set will be needed, which is why I am at least cautiously optimistic that the common core standards initiative may at least put us on the right track. As it stands now, it would appear that the students at the WRLC (Walton Rural Life Center) may well have a leg up when it comes to acquiring the right skills, utilizing the agriculture themed approach to learning that has allowed them to become critical thinkers and problem solvers. For example, Walton fourth grade students were given the problem of watering the school’s garden. They worked in groups to design a watering system. They had to measure for PVC pipe, estimate lengths, prices and then construct the irrigation system. They also worked on area and circumference.

Originally, one of the goals of the charter school movement was to create innovative schools whose efforts could be replicated across the country. While the Walton program might not succeed as well in Washington, D. C. or in Los Angeles, it might well be a model for a multitude of small, rural schools in rural communities throughout the country, preparing students to compete in a global economy with skills that can transfer to innumerable situations. And, the project based problem solving approach to teaching and learning has universal implications.

The individual teachers look at the common core standards and match classroom projects to the standards. Then when students have an interest in individual projects, the teachers can find ways to match the projects with the standards. To quote Walton Rural Life Center Principal, Natise Vogt, “Project Based Learning is fun and engaging for students. Students learn better when they are engaged. The real-life examples throughout the article demonstrate why and how they learn the common core by constantly applying the standards to actual situations.”

It has been one of the highlights of my professional career in education to watch the transformation that has occurred at the Walton Rural Life Center, knowing that the risks we took in submitting the initial application have paid off in outstanding, relevant learning opportunities for ALL students, allowing Walton to remain a viable institution of twenty-first century learning instead of becoming another shuttered building.

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